letters

We received a letter from LtCol. Hank Kramer (June Approach*), who describes himself as "a retired USAF F-16 driver who has been reading* Approach *since the 1950s and subscribing to it for over 20 years." He asked an apparently simple question: "Why does it seem that USN pilots are so reluctant to declare an emergency? This was never a big deal in the Air Force." At one time, at least, it was part of the Tactical Air Command flight regs that if you were airborne and dealing with a problem covered by the emergency procedures section of the tech order, "you will declare an emergency."*

The aviation bubbas here at the Safety Center agreed that, around the boat, most aviators are reluctant to use the "E" word during minor emergencies, because once you do so, you have lost all autonomy to handle your own issue. In other words, you've just invited the whole ship to come and sit in your lap, and also guaranteed that you'll have a lot of explaining to do on deck. With that proviso, the staff here believes that most Navy flyers know when it is appropriate to call an emergency. We correctly surmised that our readers would be glad to respond, as well. Here's some of their feedback.—Ed.

Capt. Glenn Berquist, USAF, 37FTS/DO

"I got my wings in the Navy at Beeville in '87. I am now an Air Force pilot instructing in the T-37 at Columbus AFB. The difference in instruction, comparing the Navy and Air Force, is huge. Two separate cultures exist. The Navy focused on knowledge of systems and using airmanship to handle emergencies; if it got real bad, we'd even pull out the checklist in the Navy. In the Air Force, it is strict adherence to procedures. Students are given an unsatisfactory grade if they even forget to say 'Maintain aircraft control.' Such airmanship is a given in the Navy, not so in the Air Force—students have to describe just what they'd do to maintain aircraft control, such as 'maintain wings level.' Imagine that being required CNATRA verbiage. From day one, the Air Force stresses that if you have to perform just one step of any emergency checklist, then declare an emergency, and you'd better have the pocket checklist out, referring to all the procedures. The result is Air Force pilots here declare emergencies far more often than I ever experienced in the Navy."

LCdr. Jim Ridgway, VP-94

"Having flown the T-34, T-44, P-3C, T-2, P-3 again (and currently), I have to say that I am not at all reluctant to declare an emergency should the situation dictate. I have operated only from land, never from the ship. I know there are many instances in the P-3 where a simple malfunction requires the flight to be terminated, yet is, in no way, an emergency situation. As a T-2C instructor, I found that I made several emergency calls and was adamant with my students, telling them to declare an emergency if there was any doubt at all as to whether or not they should. The priority handling far outweighs any 'arm-chair' quarterbacking you may receive after the flight."

Pete Ryan (@flightsafety.com}

"As a retired Army aviator, I couldn't resist the opportunity to make this a tri-service discussion. In the same issue of *Approach*, the lead story ("Worst Case Scenario") detailed an Army accident that caused all of us associated with Army aviation to hang our heads in shame. An appalling lack of leadership, discipline and character resulted in a tragedy. The author was gracious enough to point out that this was not a uniquely Army problem. That brings me to naval aviators' supposed reluctance to declare an emergency. I believe there is a built-in hesitance to declare an emergency, but I also believe it's more widespread than any one service or activity.

"Calling 'Uncle' attracts a lot of attention. Although we know that attention is focused on providing help, it also bares our souls and our mistakes to the whole world. We know that the largest percentage of aircraft mishaps have human factors as causes, so we are too often reluctant to 'fess up to having gotten ourselves in a bad spot. Ever run low on fuel? I mean lookin'-for-a-place-to-put-it-down-even-with-the-field-in-sight low? Ever said, 'Lord, get me past this one, and I swear I'll never do that again,' after a particularly bad decision about the weather? (Of course, these sorts of things never have happened to me personally.)

"We military flyers have a lot of ego on the line every time we slip the surly bonds. To acknowledge that we are not in complete control of the situation is an enormous confession that we are, somehow, well, human."

Davy Thorn, investigator, Lockheed-Martin (also a former A-6 BN and Naval Safety Center aircraft-mishap investigator)

"On a carrier, an IFE usually means the ship has to clear the landing area immediately. That is no small feat, has inherent risks, and disrupts the next launch cycle. That said, if we had an in-flight emergency (fire, bleed-air failure, engine problem, etc.) we would declare an emergency. If it was something that you could live with until the normal recovery time, you would inform either the Air Boss (day/VMC) or Air Ops (night/IMC) of the nature of your problem, ask for a squadron rep (usually the skipper or some experienced pilot or NFO), and come up with a game plan. Back on the beach, you might declare an IFE for this situation; on the boat, it is not an emergency, but you are

dealing with the situation professionally and expeditiously… We were taught that everyone on the ground was trying to kill you, and it was your responsibility to fly the airplane and ask for help as needed. If someone on the ground is bugging you while you're trying to deal with a systems problem, you either ignore him or politely (or otherwise) tell him to be quiet until you get the problem sorted out. As far as being an NFO, on several occasions (especially when I was the more experienced crew member in the cockpit), I was the one to call knock-it-off so that we could deal with a problem or head for home."

Cdr. Stephen Beckvonpeccoz, Executive Officer, VAQ-138

"I believe naval aviators are reluctant to declare an emergency, but I don't think it's necessarily intentional. As a culture, we just never train to say it. In carrier aviation, so many emergencies happen around the ship that we get used to thinking in terms of blue-water recovery aboard Mom. In those cases, declaring an emergency doesn't buy you anything. Instead, we calmly discuss it as a crew and talk to our wingman, the rep, the boss, the tanker, Air Ops/CATCC, and even to the controllers. We discuss how it will affect the recovery, the rest of the airborne airwing, and the deck. Then we set ourselves up for whatever kind of recovery is required. Even when I came about one minute away from needing the barricade rigged two flights in a row during this past cruise, I never declared an emergency because it already was obvious to everyone who needed to know. Ashore, we apparently train the same way. We just handle emergencies using NATOPS and sound aircraft knowledge, tempered with situational awareness and headwork. Then we decide on a course of action, tell the controllers what we'd like to do, and then do it. Today this process is called time-critical ORM, but we've been doing it since before McClusky rolled in on the carriers at Midway.

"The only time I personally declare an emergency is when I want someone ashore to do something for me while I figure out how I'm going to resolve my problem. An example: Having field personnel rig the gear or change the runway, or recommending a controller land nearby low-state aircraft, or calling for an LSO. And, this action has to be worth the 20 questions I'm then going to get over the radio.

"The Air Force operates differently than we do. We don't have an SOF (supervisor of flying) officer who can make us RTB and land, and we don't use Guard frequency to coordinate things. Perhaps we need to rethink what saying the 'E' word will buy us."

Lt. Philip Kase, VT-27

"I think it boils down to training and command culture. My naval experience has been that commanding officers and department heads put out taskers and expect the junior officers to complete the assignment without a lot of direction. Complete the mission however you want, just don't violate the rules, regs and SOPs.

"I have spoken to many AF pilots, and their culture is different. Their department heads are very much in the weeds and tell the JOs how to do the job. The AF rulebook tells you 'what to do' vice the Navy's rulebook which states 'what not to do.' In the Navy, from Fam One in flight school, students are given simulated emergencies 'in the aircraft.' The student is expected to handle the emergency according to NATOPS, using sound judgment. It is my understanding that in AF flight training, no simulated emergency is given 'in the aircraft,' only in simulators and in what's known as 'standups.' This is where students are asked to state emergency procedures in a ready room/classroom setting in front of their peers and instructor pilots.

"The difference in training may encourage Navy pilots to handle the emergency and tell ATC, a wingman, or a maintenance rep of their intentions and get recommendations. When flying in the shipboard environment, and an aircraft has an emergency, the pilot handles it with the realization that his emergency should not preclude others from being able to land at the only landing site: the carrier flightdeck. As well, his emergency may force others in the battle group to assist him, vice performing their primary mission, which is to protect the battle group. He is expected to handle the emergency with minimal effect on the battle group force that may be operating 12 miles off the coast of an unfriendly country.

"In the AF, while the emergency aircraft pilot is handling the emergency… an SOF is responsible for helping the aircraft and can tell all other aircraft to hold position, depart the pattern, etc. This position doesn't exist in the Navy."

LCdr. Joe "Gonzo" Barnes, CNAP Force LSO

"The use of the 'E' word in carrier operations is usually unnecessary. When we are operating around the ship, we are in constant contact with aviators. The captain, air boss, air operations officer, and LSO are all aviators. They are listening to the comms. When someone calls and says they have an engine failure, everyone knows the gravity of the situation, and the wheels go into motion to solve the problem. If we were to state that we are now 'declaring an emergency,' it would not magically make things move faster. The use of the 'E' word is to ensure that the controlling agency understands that we are now going to cancel the mission, deviate from FARs, and land wherever and whenever we choose. In carrier aviation, we don't operate under all the same rules, don't have all those choices, and may have to wait to recover. Our representative will reference NATOPS and the Air Wing instruction to help us decide how to manage the problem (i.e., emergency pull forward, wait till next recovery cycle). I think that most aviators who have brought an aircraft aboard single-engine, at night, in bad weather, know they had an emergency. Did they say it? No. Did everyone know it? Yes."